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Author(s): Kevin Mattson

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Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities of Chastened Liberalism

Kevin Mattson
Ohio University

The political theory of Christopher Lasch—one of America's most prominent public intellectuals—is set within its own historical context and analyzed in this essay. It focuses on Lasch's relationship to American liberalism both in political and intellectual terms. Typically this relationship is understood as antagonistic, but here the relationship is seen as more sympathetic and nuanced. This essay examines the themes of class, social control, and democratic theory by exploring Lasch's biography and his use of history to inform political theory. It ends by suggesting a chastened form of liberal thought that can respond to the criticisms made of the tradition

Kevin Mattson teaches intellectual history at Ohio University and is author of *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (2002) and co-editor of *Steal This University!: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement* (2003). He is presently writing a book about the tradition of post-war liberal thought in America.

I appreciate what is valuable in the liberal tradition, which seemed to me at one time to offer the best hope of a decent kind of politics, and for that very reason liberalism strikes me as more worthy of engagement and criticism than other traditions. If I seem to spend a lot of time attacking liberalism and the Left, that should be taken . . . as a mark of respect.

—Christopher Lasch¹

Christopher Lasch stands as one of the most important thinkers in post-war American social theory and political thought. Known mostly as a social critic who wrote for a wide audience, he was trained as an historian. Nonetheless, he was not a professional or academic historian but a political critic who *utilized* history. John Patrick Diggins went so far as to call Lasch “the Richard Hofstadter of our generation,” and the comparison seems appropriate since Lasch thought of himself as an independent thinker unwilling to be held back by the limitations of professionalized history (he was a quintessential “public intellectual”). For this reason and others, his thinking is often difficult to pin down, taking on the features of what some pejora-

1. “History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch,” *Journal of American History* 80 (1994): 1311.

tively call “generalist” writing. Lasch’s thought covered a variety of ground—taking up numerous topics in a career that, though cut short by an early death, was certainly prolific. Lasch published at least six essays or reviews per year and ten books (one posthumously). Beyond the sheer quantity of output, his career as a writer and thinker failed to fit an easily discernible path.²

Nonetheless, there is one theme that runs through Lasch’s work. This is the theme of liberalism—a slippery term. In his first book, Lasch wrote, “The term ‘liberal’ is surely one of the most baffling in political discourse.” The claim is as accurate today as it was when he wrote those words, but for the purpose of this essay, I will focus on liberalism as a political theory that is sympathetic to the welfare state, as captured in the New Deal and Great Society, with a concomitant respect for civil and political rights. While recognizing the looseness of the term, an examination of how Christopher Lasch related to the variegated liberal tradition helps us better understand two things: Lasch’s political thought itself and liberalism’s problems (some might say crisis) during the second half of the twentieth century. As interest in Lasch’s work has grown since his death in 1994, other critics have recognized this connection. For instance, Louis Menand has discussed Lasch’s “quarrel with liberalism.” Eric Miller has organized a portion of his short biography of Lasch around “leaving” liberalism. Stephen Holmes has gone one step further and tried to fit Lasch’s work into a larger tradition of “anti-liberal” thought in Western culture—one that includes the fascist ideologue, Carl Schmitt. Those who have examined Lasch seem to agree on one thing: liberalism is central to understanding the meaning of this social critic’s oeuvre.³

If political theorists like Holmes have started to pay attention to Lasch, they often see in his criticism of liberalism little more than error. Holmes berates Lasch for numerous intellectual faults, many of them stemming from going outside the strictures of liberal thought. He chastises Lasch’s “social criticism” for its “eye-catching

2. John Patrick Diggins to Christopher Lasch, letter dated July 19, 1993, Lasch Papers: Box 7C, Folder 4. Those interested in Lasch’s work must be grateful for the work of Robert Cummings who created a comprehensive Lasch Bibliography that is posted at the University of Rochester’s Library home page: www.lib.rochester.edu. Lasch cited David Riesman as one model of the sort of social criticism he hoped to emulate: “*The Culture of Narcissism Revisited*,” *World and I*, May, 1990: 513. For an important treatment of history’s use by public intellectuals, see Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). On Charles Beard as a public intellectual, see Thomas Bender’s essay on him in his *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). The personal influence of Richard Hofstadter is clear from Lasch’s correspondence with him: See Box 1, Folders 4 and 14 of the Lasch papers.

3. Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962; reprint, New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), vii. Louis Menand, “Christopher Lasch’s Quarrel with Liberalism,” in *The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past*, ed. John Patrick Diggins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Eric Miller, “Radical Vision: Christopher Lasch and the Quest for Community,” in *Building a Healthy Culture: Strategies for an American Renaissance*, ed. Don Eberly (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001); Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

speculative sociological generalizations based on vague intuitions." Lasch, we are told, suffered from a "disheveled eclecticism of his mind." He could regard "liberal politics" only as "sinister" and a slave to "technical innovations and economic growth." Since Lasch deigned to criticize consumer culture, Holmes asks flippantly: "Should television sets and credit cards be confiscated and destroyed?" Holmes's critique conforms to a general line of argument that Lasch tried unsuccessfully to counteract during his own lifetime—that he was a "curmudgeon," bent on naysaying to the dominant, rational, liberal doctrine.⁴

Holmes's dismissive attitude towards Lasch further polarizes an already polarized debate. By placing Lasch alongside thinkers like Carl Schmitt, he suggests a slippery slope from questioning some of liberalism's principles to falling prey to fascist dreams of a strong state and organic communities. We are left with a bipolar world of liberalism versus fascism. While Lasch certainly made intellectual mistakes and shed too much of liberalism's insights, as I will show here, it is unfair to place him in a fascist pantheon. Holmes, as a theorist reliant upon European political thought, fails to recognize just how much Lasch was a part of the *American* intellectual tradition and fits within debates carried out among American liberals after the "backlash" of the 1960s. Indeed, Holmes's dismissal takes Lasch's critique of liberalism too far out of the liberal circle, making it all too easy for liberals to slough it off. As political thinkers like William Galston, Stephen Macedo, James Kloppenberg, and Peter Berkowitz have made abundantly clear, liberals have rethought their tradition in response to its critics (i.e., republican, communitarian, populist or otherwise).⁵

I will show just how much Lasch fit within a wider rethinking of liberalism that has marked so much of post-World War II intellectual thought. Biographically, Lasch cut his intellectual teeth within the world of American Cold War Liberal thought—the thinking and activism of Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Hofstadter, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. He traveled out of this world most certainly, but not as far as some think. When he responded to the "backlash" of the late 1960s and 1970s and the resulting disaffection of working people from the Democratic Party, he wound up developing ideas akin to certain liberal political theorists—including William Galston—who would have an enormous impact on the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) and the presidency of Bill Clinton (for whom Lasch voted in 1992). Even though Lasch clearly pushed further beyond liberalism (towards an out and out rejection) than these critics would, what is most remarkable is how much Lasch *shared* with liberal rethinking. The relation between Lasch's thought

4. Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 126, 129, 138-9, 139. Lasch discussed his characterization as a curmudgeon in "History as Social Criticism."

5. See here William Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

and liberal rethinking is a much a trickier and nuanced one than his critics assumed. During the 1990s (towards the end of his life), when many felt that Lasch was a stark conservative, he in fact held onto certain key liberal principles and even, as I will show, developed ideas that can be squared with a developing vision of civic liberalism.

In this essay, I will squarely face where Lasch made a break with liberal ideas—examining the broad themes of class, social control, and democracy in his political thought—while taking note of remaining liberal elements. My argument is not that Lasch can be squared entirely with the liberal tradition but that he himself either dead-ended when he went outside of it or that there was a closeness and fondness for certain liberal virtues that he himself could not entirely leave behind. I would argue, against Holmes and other liberals, that we need to *listen* more carefully to liberalism's critics, especially if we hope to toughen the liberal tradition for difficult times ahead. What Holmes ignores is how some of the most vociferous criticisms of liberalism have come from *within* the liberal tradition or at least in serious response to outsiders. In many ways, Lasch was part of general rethinking of liberal ideas—one that climaxed in the Cold War with the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, and Lionel Trilling and then later in the communitarian basis of much of "third way" political thought, with its critique of "new politics," entitlement liberalism, and "rights talk." Thus, this essay has two purposes: to understand an important political thinker and historian on his own grounds and to think about the possibilities of a chastened liberalism—one that recognizes its own shortcomings.

Beginnings: A Realist Liberal Turns Radical

Lasch's intellectual life went through many phases. By fact of family background and geography, he began as a midwestern progressive. Emulating his parents' New Deal liberalism, Lasch pledged support to Henry Wallace (the presidential candidate of the Progressive Party), much to the chagrin of his fellow high school students. He then "left liberalism," in the mid-1960s, becoming increasingly favorable to the New Left but remaining skeptical of its politics of confrontation. By the 1970s, Lasch grew interested in Freudian cultural criticism, some of it with New Left tones and some pointing in more conservative directions. Trying to marry Marx and Freud (as the Frankfurt School did before him), Lasch then found himself increasingly enamored with communitarian political criticism—the sort that inspired many thinkers who would have influence within the New Democratic and Third Way constellation. Indeed, Lasch had a brief connection with President Jimmy Carter who was beginning to articulate a liberal politics that seemed more culturally conservative and pro-family. Lasch held onto his peculiar variant of Marxism and Freudianism throughout the 1980s, but by the late 1980s and early 1990s, he questioned this constellation of ideas. He started to "leave the left" and

expressed growing interest not only in American intellectual sources but also populism and republican (small r) political theory.⁶

Lasch's first transition, from Midwestern Progressive to Cold War Liberal realist, was an important one that set the stage for much of his later intellectual development. It took place as a graduate student when Lasch worked with William Leuchtenberg—a young historian active within the main liberal organization of the time, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and author of a history of the New Deal. At the same time, he was introduced to Richard Hofstadter—the “dominant figure” on Lasch's “intellectual horizon.” Hofstadter was starting to adapt Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy of irony and complexity to the writing of history and undoubtedly Niebuhr's *direct* influence—unmediated by Hofstadter—was felt as well. From Hofstadter, it was an easy step into wider debates among key liberal intellectuals. Lasch explained how he read George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Lionel Trilling with a great deal of interest during the 1950s. He praised John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* in a glowing review and seemed safely ensconced in the world of what he would later call “Cold War liberalism”—the philosophy of ADA for instance—as he lambasted conservative critics as dogmatic and unworthy of serious recognition.⁷

After studying at Columbia and imbibing the spirit of Cold War liberalism, Lasch turned his dissertation into a book, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*. Tones of Kennan and Niebuhr were clear. Lasch went back to the American liberal reaction to the Russian Revolution to acquire a better sense of the roots of the Cold War. In many ways, he read the original optimistic reaction of some liberals to the Russian Revolution through the lens of Kennan's famous Telegram of 1947. What liberals had done wrong was think they had anything in common with Russian revolutionaries. Incapable of breaking out of their Enlightenment biases, liberals failed to recognize the “complete cynicism which enabled” the Russians “to use any means to accomplish the end in sight.” Since liberals could only frame others from their own rosy conception of human nature, they remade Bolsheviks into democrats. The influence of Kennan's thinking was so strong here that Lasch often found himself having to distinguish himself from Kennan, arguing that his book was intended to “illumine, not our relations with Russia, but the history of American liberal thought.” Here the other influence on Lasch is clear—that is, Reinhold Niebuhr's penetrating critique of the nineteenth-century doctrine of inevitable progress. Liberals, Lasch claimed, could not understand the “terror” of the Russian

6. This brief biographical sketch relies upon Eric Miller, “Radical Vision: Christopher Lasch and the Quest for Community” and the interview with Lasch, “History as Social Criticism.”

7. “History as Social Criticism,” 1317; on Galbraith, see “Production is not the Key: Harvard Professor's Brilliant Survey of Our Society,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 15, 1958, 4C; “The Wrong Sort of Conservatism,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 16, 1959, 2B. For the intellectual tradition of Cold War liberalism, see Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

Revolution because they were “nurtured in the traditions of nineteenth century rationalism, brought up to believe in the irresistible moral progress of the human spirit.” Elsewhere he stated that liberals “simply could not bring themselves to believe” in dastardly acts. The failure to recognize the Bolsheviks for what they were illustrated how liberalism became a “messianic creed” with a faith in “progress” and therefore incapable of scrutinizing the “benevolent assumptions of the eighteenth century Enlightenment.” “Liberalism,” Lasch explained in an article published shortly after the book appeared, was too “committed to progress and confidence of man’s essential reasonableness” to confront difficulties abroad or at home.⁸

In many ways, Lasch foreshadowed his later criticism of liberalism as an optimistic doctrine of progress (especially that found in *The True and Only Heaven*). What is clear is that Lasch came to this criticism of progress through the liberal tradition itself—from the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, and even Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (whose *The Vital Center* echoed throughout *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*). This realist strain and critique of liberalism’s blindness stuck throughout the years. In 1971, Lasch would condemn the “optimistic illusion of progress”; a bit later, he would question a “Whiggish” sense of historical improvement. In 1980, he would praise Lewis Mumford for what sounded like ideas deeply indebted to Niebuhr—that is, his “acknowledgment of the radical imperfectability of human nature, his rejection of the dogma of progress. . . .” When Lasch wrote *The True and Only Heaven* in 1991 and criticized the doctrine of progress and liberalism, it might have appeared as a break in his intellectual development, but, in fact, it drew from an old line of reasoning—one that grew from within the liberal tradition itself.⁹

At the same time, there were fissures in the mindset of this budding young realist. The first came from dissatisfaction with the New Deal. By the 1940s, Niebuhr had become more comfortable with Roosevelt and liberalism; in *The Vital Center* (1949), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. had already explained how the New Deal had escaped the perils of fascism and business anarchy and was writing a series of his-

8. *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*, 118, 123; Letter from Lasch to William Leuchtenberg, dated January 23, 1961, Lasch Papers, Box 1, Folder 5; “Is Conservatism the Real Enemy?” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 2, 1961, 2C. For Lasch’s praise of Kennan, see “The Historian as Diplomat,” *The Nation*, November 24, 1962, 348. Lasch had not yet made the break towards the New Left. This is seen in his disagreement with William Appleman Williams. Lasch argued that American intervention in Siberia, for instance, was not motivated by rigid anti-Bolshevik ideology, as William Appleman Williams saw it, but rather by an “uncertain and confused” state of mind: “American Intervention in Siberia: A Reinterpretation,” *Political Science Quarterly* 77 (1962): 208. For more on Williams, see Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2002), Chapter Four.

9. “From Culture to Politics,” in *The Revival of American Socialism*, ed. George Fischer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 219; *The World of Nations: Reflections on American History, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1973), xii; “Lewis Mumford and the Myth of the Machine” (1980), reprinted in *The Salmagundi Reader*, ed. Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 150. On Niebuhr, I rely upon Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

torical treatments explaining just how. But for Lasch in 1959, the New Deal was little more than what later New Left critics would call “corporate liberalism”—that is, a defense of corporate interests via meager reform. He laughed at the “notion” that “the New Deal was an anti-business movement.” He pointed to the “limitations” of New Deal pragmatism, seeing it as incoherent and aimless. Indeed, he had an extended correspondence with William Leuchtenberg precisely about this matter. The second fissure in Lasch’s liberal realism emerged due to his worries that anti-communism had become dogmatic and emptied of any positive content. Reviewing Mario Einaudi’s *The Roosevelt Revolution*, Lasch complained: “Not least among the unhappy consequences of the Cold War is that it drives people like Professor Einaudi to the position of saying that anything at all is better than Communism, and then making that brave assertion the cornerstone of their defense of ‘freedom.’ Has freedom no more positive meaning than this? Must we be content indefinitely to draw comfort from such an insipid version of our recent history?” Both concerns with the limits of the New Deal and anti-communism pushed Lasch out of the realm of realist liberalism.¹⁰

Historical events pushed him even harder. When Eisenhower admitted to flying U-2 spy planes into Soviet air space, Lasch became disheartened. Khrushchev had seemed to promise some lessening of the tensions of the Cold War, and now it seemed to Lasch that the U.S. was doing all it could to heat it up. Here too, Lasch followed Kennan’s reassessment of containment, though he turned a harsher lens on Cold War liberals. Growing frustrated, Lasch started to direct his anger at intellectual activists like Arthur Schlesinger for becoming too “hard boiled,” too prone to see a communist threat where there was none. Lasch complained that Schlesinger “exaggerated the strength of the communists and fellow-travelers to the left of him,” thereby fueling the fire of mindless anti-communism. But it was not just Schlesinger’s poor judgment that Lasch questioned, it was “pragmatic liberalism” *tout court*. Lasch was reviving a debate about the philosophy of pragmatism by questioning its lack of moral standards; at times, he seemed to confuse pragmatism with sheer opportunism. Without clear moral standards to judge policy, Lasch believed liberals would fall prey to what worked best for those holding power. It was now more than just judging the Russians more favorably, it was the question of whether or not liberals even had the capacity to judge at all.¹¹

By 1963, Lasch seemed ready to listen to the New Left that was just starting to congeal in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-Violent

10. “Light on the New Deal: Mr. Morgenthau’s Storehouse,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 22, 1959, 4C; “Brief for the New Deal,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 9, 1959, 4E. For the correspondence with Leuchtenberg, see the Lasch Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

11. “Arthur Schlesinger and ‘Pragmatic Liberalism.’ Part 2: The Uses of Realism,” *Iowa Defender*, May 6, 1963, 1. On the U-2 Incident, see Christopher Lasch, “The Historian as Diplomat,” 351 and “What About the Intellectuals?” *New York Times Book Review*, October 16, 1966, 58.

Coordinating Committee (SNCC). But, as he explained to Arthur Waskow, he was unaware of the budding New Left in 1963. Needless to say, his criticism of cold war liberals and intellectuals specifically seems to run parallel to many of those within the New Left. A year after SDS wrote its famous Port Huron statement, Lasch was arguing for more "democracy" in foreign policy, specifically contending that "decisions of those in power" should be "scrutinized with great care by the people who put them there." The intellectual, as Lasch saw it, had a specific role to play in facilitating the process—a role shamefully abdicated by pragmatic liberals like Arthur Schlesinger. Lasch called for intellectuals to "encourage people to imagine other alternatives besides the ones whose timeless truth" is taken "for granted." Lasch hoped intellectuals could move beyond the "the framework of existing alternatives." More than any other aspect of the small anti-Vietnam War movement at the time, the "teach-ins" on college campuses in 1965 captured this democratic ambition of the New Left. Not surprisingly, Lasch rushed to get involved.¹²

The teach-ins started at the University of Michigan in 1965, under the leadership of Arnold Kaufman, a philosopher who had already done much to develop the philosophy of "participatory democracy" that had an enormous impact on Tom Hayden. In protest against the War, some faculty and students wanted to walk out on strike against normally scheduled classes. Kaufman and others believed this was too radical and would alienate the public. So instead, they put on a teach-in that included many lectures and presentations about the war. It started when classes ended at 8 p.m. and went until classes began the next morning at 8 a.m., thus showing just how committed participants were to debating the war. By not breaking university rules, teach-ins embraced rational, open-ended, and democratic deliberation against the secrecy of LBJ's policy in Vietnam. Quickly teach-ins spread to other campuses. At the University of Iowa (where he taught from 1963 to 1966), Lasch helped put together a teach-in in the same year as Michigan's. He also did much to explain the teach-in's significance. Arguing against the feasibility of using "civil disobedience," Lasch embraced the teach-in's "combination of argument and orderly demonstration." He also believed teach-ins provided a forum by which intellectuals could in fact engage in the process of democratic deliberation. As he explained to William Leuchtenberg, "One reason why the teach-ins were so promising was that it [sic] showed students that it was possible to use a scholarly career for something besides professional self-advancement." To succeed, though, the teach-ins would

12. Lasch to Arthur Waskow, September 8, 1965, in response to a letter of Waskow's in which he complains that Lasch ignored SDS's call to "participatory democracy" and "decentralization": Lasch Papers, Box 2, Folder 2; "Understanding the Russians and Understanding Ourselves," *Teacher's College Record* 65 (1963): 162; "Arthur Schlesinger and 'Pragmatic Liberalism,'" Part 3: The Historian as Politician," *Iowa Defender*, May 13, 1963, 4. For another piece that showed Lasch's interest in the budding New Left, see his review of David Riesman's book *Abundance for What?*, "The Bored," *The Progressive*, September, 1964, 49-50. In many ways, Lasch's commitment to the teach-in movement showed that his call for intellectuals to be detached from institutions of politics did not entail a rejection of all activism.

have to challenge the stranglehold of the “anti-Communist Left” that needed to be “purged of its obsession with the menace” of Communism. Thus, Lasch was beginning to show interest in not just anti-anti-communism but also the idea of “participatory democracy” that would inform SDS and Lasch’s own critique of welfare state liberalism.¹³

Unlike realist critics of Vietnam like Walter Lippmann, Lasch now seemed eager to forge a *moral* critique of the war. A year after the teach-in, Lasch explained that realism “keeps us from experiencing, as a moral fact, the geopolitical fact with which we are so familiar, that the West represents historically an island of physical well-being in an otherwise wretched world.” He now pressed the ethical question whether Americans could “square the wholesale destruction of civilian populations with our claims to humanity.” Unlike pragmatic liberals such as Schlesinger, Lasch had no trouble talking of the perils of anti-communism—in much the same vein as the Port Huron Statement. Indeed, Lasch became quick to defend the New Left against liberals who saw its anti-anti-communism as too complicit with totalitarian tendencies. Lasch explained, “As Arthur Waskow has noted, what [New Leftists] have learned from the 1930s is not that Stalinists should be purged but that they themselves should not act like Stalinists.” Lasch made his predilections clear by defending an old friend, Staughton Lynd, who had embraced the New Left and gotten into trouble as a professor with the Chicago State College’s administration. Lasch’s criticism of the dogmatism of anti-communism and pragmatic liberalism—which he saw as increasingly defining the status quo of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—seemed to put Lasch squarely within the New Left.¹⁴

Nonetheless, to characterize Lasch as comfortable with the New Left would be unfair. In many ways, he shared a great deal with a group of thinkers and activists that I call “radical liberals.” Arnold Kaufman, Irving Howe, and Michael Harrington best represented this political tendency among American intellectuals. Inspired by the legacy of Norman Thomas’s socialism (itself anti-communist) and committed to rational debate and long-term reform, this group of thinkers found itself partially sympathetic but increasingly critical of the New Left. Its own views on socialism seemed not too distant from the liberal reform tradition of the New Deal. They wound up defending much of the liberal tradition in the face of mounting criticism coming from the New Left—trying to argue that there was something crucial for rad-

13. “New Curriculum for the Teach-Ins” (1965), reprinted in *Teach-Ins: U.S.A.: Reports, Opinions, Documents*, ed. Louis Menashe and Ronald Radosh (New York: Praeger, 1967), 306, 308; Lasch to Leuchtenberg, letter dated July 17, 1965, Lasch Papers, Box 1, Folder 18. For more on the teach-in movement, see Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action*, Chapter Five.

14. “What Shall a Moral Man Do?” *The Nation*, November 28, 1966, 583; “The Unthinkable Target,” *The Nation*, August 16, 1965, 88; “Radical Movements in the U.S.A.—A Survey,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 4, 1966, 4B; “The Lynd Case,” *The Nation*, October 16, 1967: 354. On Lippmann’s realist criticism of the Vietnam War, see Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 566.

icals to hang onto here. Pitting the new left against liberals made for dangerous politics. These thinkers and activists hoped that a new coalition politics could help revive a radical voice within the Democratic Party and thus put an end to the Vietnam War, while at the same time creating a more humane voice in American politics.¹⁵

By the mid to late 1960s, Lasch found himself in agreement with much within this radical liberal tradition. In 1966, he accepted Irving Howe's criticism of confrontational styles of politics seeping into the New Left and admitted that he should have read more of Howe's works during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like Howe, he condemned Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd's tendency to romanticize the Vietcong: "Justly revolted by the propagandistic picture of Communists as monsters, Lynd and Hayden have turned them into equally lifeless symbols of international brotherhood." Though he criticized Michael Harrington's high assessment of the labor movement, Lasch fully agreed with his assessment of poverty—that it was widespread and concealed at the same time. Indeed, in 1968 Staughton Lynd pointed out (correctly) that Lasch shared a great deal in common with Harrington's social democratic politics. Though Lasch was becoming sympathetic to Western Marxism (a political and social theory that he never really fully understood), he still saw much good in Arnold Kaufman's "radical liberalism." For instance, Lasch defended "free speech" and the "separation of powers" against New Leftists who wanted to drive a wedge between the left and liberalism. He condemned the "strategy of 'confrontation'" becoming more prevalent in the New Left during the late 1960s. Lasch even claimed a bit later that "throughout the sixties, there had been a reciprocal relation between Kennedy liberalism and the new left, easily overlooked by radicals who insist that the left thrives on repression." To make the connection between Lasch and radical liberalism clear, consider that he endorsed McCarthy in 1968—Irving Howe's and Arnold Kaufman's favorite candidate.¹⁶

15. For more on this tradition, see Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action*; Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000); and Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

16. "Journey to Hanoi," *New York Times Book Review*, April 23, 1967, 18; for Lasch's comments on Howe, see his "Radical Movements in the U.S.A.—A Survey"; "What About the Intellectuals"; for Lasch's critique of Harrington's faith in unions, see *The World of Nations*, 176-7; for his appreciation of Harrington's work on poverty, see "The Decline of Dissent," *Katallagete*, Winter, 1966-67, 17; for Lynd's argument that Lasch was closer to Harrington than Lasch himself would admit, see their debate in "The Future of Radicalism," *New York Review of Books*, September 12, 1968, 42; for Lasch's criticism of Kaufman's liberalism and his defense of "Western Marxists," see "The New Politics: 1968 and After," *New York Review of Books*, July 11, 1968, 3; *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 161; Contribution to "Prospects for American Radicalism," *New Politics* 7 (1968): 7; *The World of Nations*, 125. The fact that Lasch never really understood Marxism can be seen in his explaining to Genovese that he did not really comprehend "Marxist historiography." Letter dated, February 12, 1966, Lasch Papers, Box 2, Folder 2. It is also clear that he really learned about Marxism from a future student, Russell Jacoby. In "The Future of Radicalism," (page 43), Lasch wrote, "In the meantime, McCarthy's unambiguous opposition to the war, his attacks on the FBI and CIA, and his genuinely democratic instincts make him clearly preferable to any of the other principal candidates." Lasch was also on the National Committee for McCarthy as seen in letterhead and a note from McCarthy in the Lasch Papers, Box 2, Folder 12. The criticism of the New Left's confrontation politics

So what does it mean to say that Lasch seemed comfortable with much of what can be called “radical liberalism”? First, it means that Lasch was both sympathetic and skeptical about the New Left, that though he drifted into the New Left orbit, he did not necessarily believe in driving a wedge between the New Left and liberalism. More importantly, in this context, it suggests that Lasch remained open to the realist dimensions in Cold War liberalism even while criticizing its misapplications, limitations, and abuses. That is, he expressed skepticism—in good realist fashion—about the utopian and revolutionary tendencies within the New Left while remaining on the left. Looking back on his intellectual development in 1991, Lasch claimed that his own “dissatisfaction with the new left” in the 1960s “did not imply any break with the historic traditions of the left. . . .” But it also symbolized that Lasch had come to a very specific juncture in his intellectual development. In many ways, he was now pledged to voicing a left-leaning political vision both critical and yet reliant on the liberal tradition. Precisely because he thought of liberalism as having exhausted itself during the Cold War—an argument he made explicit in portions of *The New Radicalism in America* (1965) and *The Agony of the American Left* (1969)—Lasch now wanted to search for an alternative to “pragmatic liberalism.” It was still not clear just how much this would serve as an “in-house” (i.e., sympathetic) criticism or how much of this would serve as strict opposition. To find out, it is best to look at some broad themes in Lasch’s intellectual development from the late 1960s until his death in 1994. By examining the themes of class, social control, and democratic alternatives, we can get a better sense of where Lasch’s criticism went, what it tells us about the unraveling of liberalism after the 1960s, and what illumination it brings to liberalism’s potential recovery today.¹⁷

The Unspoken Conceit: Class and Liberalism

As Lasch became more critical of how “pragmatic liberals” like Arthur Schlesinger wedded themselves to institutions of power (the Kennedy and Johnson administrations more specifically), he started to sense an increasingly elitist quality in their worldview. Criticizing a book of essays edited by Hans Morgenthau, Lasch lambasted a snobbish tendency among the liberals gathered together in the book. He argued that the authors were “inflated with a sense of their own infallibility and contemptuous of the ordinary citizen, whom they suspect of being, at heart, a ‘Yahoo,’

seemed to stick with Lasch. He was still discussing it in 1979: see his *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 152, 257.

17. *The True and Only Heaven*, 28. That Lasch was confused in 1968 seems clear from letters in the Lasch Papers. It also seems clear that in 1970, he is still confused. He writes William Appleman Williams on April 30, 1970, “I seem to have come to some sort of dead end in my own work and am uncertain what direction to take.” Lasch Papers, Box 3, Folder 1. This seems to make clear that Lasch faced a distinct juncture in and around 1968-1970. For further evidence, see how he admits being confused to Gar Alperovitz: Letter of March 27, 1968, Box 2, Folder 8.

in [John] Roche's phrase." Lasch broadened this pointed criticism in his book, *The New Radicalism in America* (1965). He explained, "The liberalism of the fifties and sixties, with unconcealed elitism and its adulation of wealth, power, and 'style,' was firmly rooted in a social fact of prime importance: the rise of the intellectuals to the status of a privileged class, fully integrated into the social organism." This was not far from the criticism waged by C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman during the 1950s—that liberal intellectuals had become too comfortable with institutions of power. Like them, Lasch suggested that liberalism had become not just comfortable with what Daniel Bell would call an "end of ideology" but elitist in its assumptions. Put another way, there now appeared a *class* dimension to liberalism.¹⁸

During the late 1960s, Lasch's political vision tended to veer in different directions, seemingly reflecting this notoriously chaotic period in American political life. He defended liberalism while embracing Marxism (though he admitted that he did not have a very good handle on this doctrine). He developed an ill-defined fear that fascism was dawning in America. At his most confused moments, he called for "an alternative political system" (whatever that would mean) distinct from a "protest movement or a third party," but never clarified just how to accomplish such a massive task. At other times, he called for a "revolutionary party" that could include "students, disaffected faculty, professionals, and other middle class dissidents. . . ." The same year, he denounced "participation in electoral politics" as "incompatible" with building a social movement. He believed that "the university" held a great deal of promise for a future radicalism but at the same time feared that the New Left had too narrow a constituency among students. He was quick to condemn the "sectarian purity" of SDS, seemingly the most important student group of the New Left. That Lasch seemed uncertain about his political vision can easily be explained by the general confusion sweeping across the country in 1968—a year of unraveling and turmoil.¹⁹

One thing remained constant during the late 1960s and early 1970s—the use of class in understanding contemporary politics. In the first place, Lasch cut through the myth of a classless society by following C. Wright Mills's assessment of a power elite (thereby, Lasch eschewed the post-war liberal stress on pluralism, captured in the thinking of Daniel Bell, David Riesman, and Arthur Schlesinger). For Lasch, the American elite was made up of "big capitalists, high level executives, managers, highly paid corporation lawyers, and heads of the military bureaucracy." Below this power elite a "new class" had emerged. Once again following Mills's sociological analysis, Lasch denied that the new class of white collar employees—what he called "managers and intellectuals"—really asserted any significant power; instead,

18. "Democratic Vistas," *New York Review of Books*, September 30, 1965, 4; *The New Radicalism in America*, 316.

19. "The New Politics: 1968 and After," 5, 6; "'In' Game," *New York Review of Books*, December 5, 1968, 50; the fear of fascism is seen in "Same Old New Class," *New York Review of Books*, September 28, 1967, 12-14 and *The Agony of the American Left*, 207.

they were what he called “servants to power.” Just underneath this new class was the traditional (blue collar) working class. And then there was the underclass or those mired in the “culture of poverty”—citizens who were so desperate that, no matter what Herbert Marcuse and other wide-eyed revolutionaries might have hoped, could never play a significant role in political change. This class schema guided his thinking from this point on.²⁰

Obviously, students constituted the prime players within the burgeoning New Left. Lasch argued in 1969 that the New Left was a “student movement based on ‘alienation.’” This was its major limitation since it led to isolation. The New Left needed to “forge links with those who work in the main institutions of industrial society. . .” if it were to become truly effective. Lasch sought “a genuine student-worker alliance” that could illustrate how the dehumanization of student life in multiversities related to the de-skilling of labor in modern factories. Only by connecting to “large numbers of people in their working lives” could the left become something more than just a student movement or what he called “alienated intellectuals.” Lasch was not suggesting that students hang out at the steel plant, for the nature of the working class had changed. Now it included “the new proletariat of teachers, bureaucrats, and technicians” who needed to be organized. As the working class required more technical training, it would find itself in the modern university—hence, bringing it in contact with the New Left.²¹

This focus on the student movement linking up with the working class suggested the need for some sort of coalition politics—an idea that other “radical liberals” were developing at the same time (i.e., Arnold Kaufman and Michael Harrington). While demanding that the New Left not alienate the working class, Lasch also called for “a reawakening of the democratic instinct in middle-class Americans,” a reawakening that would rely upon “a consciousness of the degree to which they too are corrupted, degraded, and victimized by the very arrangements that have made possible their unprecedented prosperity.” Lasch had been inspired by Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* and its critique of work within an “organized society,” and Lasch’s hope in middle class anger illustrated his reliance upon this important New Left intellectual. At one point, Lasch thought the best way to build a bridge between the middle (and new) and working classes was to fuse “community poli-

20. “The Making of the War Class,” *Columbia Forum* 1 (1971): 3; “Take Me to Your Leader,” *New York Review of Books*, October 18, 1973, 64; for Lasch’s assessment of the “new class,” see “Same Old New Class,” *New York Review of Books*, December 7, 1967, 41-43 (an exchange with Walter Weisskopf); see also his discussion of John Kenneth Galbraith and Michael Harrington’s debate on the new class in *The Agony of the American Left*, 196-7; for Lasch’s thoughts on the “culture of poverty” thesis, see *The Agony of the American Left*, 123-4. Marcuse’s hope in the lumpenproletariat in carrying out the “great refusal,” can be gleaned from Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 256.

21. *The Agony of the American Left*, 180; “Epilogue,” in *The New American Revolution*, ed. Roderick Aya and Norman Miller (New York: Free Press, 1971), 330, 331; *Agony*, 59; “Prospects for American Radicalism,” 6; on how the working class was entering the university, see “Toward a New Program for the University” (1969), reprinted in *TriQuarterly* 63 (1985): 145.

tics" (the sort practiced by the New Left) with "trade union politics." Only this sort of connection could prevent the New Left from becoming isolated or settling for the privatization of liberation increasingly pursued by the counterculture.²²

The possibility of losing the working class became an increasing source of worry for Lasch (as it would for some Democrats later on). Nixon's victories in 1968 and 1972 made clear that backlash was a reality and that the left was failing miserably to respond to it. He chastised the left when it "ridiculed" the "fears" of ethnics and instead embraced the ethic of "do your own thing" in the face of working class disgust at "permissiveness." He also worried in 1972 that "busing" had incited "the distress of working-class communities threatened with forced integration." As he saw it, liberals were finding it harder to keep the working class on their side. Deeply disturbed, Lasch called on the left to think about how to link up again with the working class.²³

As Lasch delved into questions of psychoanalysis, feminism, and the family during the mid to late 1970s, he paid less attention to class divisions, while focusing on the permissive culture of the new middle classes. But then came Reagan, and Lasch returned to questions of class with something of a vengeance. In an article provocatively entitled "The Conservative 'Backlash' and the Cultural Civil War" (1981) he revisited the problem of class and the New Left, arguing that the movements of the 1960s showed "much political promise" but could never "achieve any kind of imaginative identification with the American working-class culture." Two years later, Lasch argued with liberals like Walter Dean Burnham, suggesting that the left needed to take seriously the right's attack on permissiveness rather than ignore it. Increasingly, Lasch believed that the working class had a right to complain about feeling rejected by liberals. To make this clear, he turned Norman Lear's "Archie Bunker" portrayal on its head: this character, Lasch argued, sprung "not so much from 'anti-intellectualism' or ethnocentricity as from the realistic perception that working class values are the chief casualties of the 'cultural revolution' with which liberalism has increasingly identified itself."²⁴

22. *Agony*, 31; "Decline of Dissent," 17; *World of Nations*, 143; "Epilogue," 330. While his friend Staughton Lynd was appropriating populist language to justify New Left politics, Lasch rejected such a move—ironically, since he would become known later for articulating a populist vision only later in the 1990s. In the late 1960s, he saw populism tending towards "vagueness": *Agony*, 6-7. Lasch had reviewed Goodman's *People or Personnel: Decentralizing and the Mixed System*, arguing that it had a great deal of promise but lacked any political muscle behind its proposals: "Getting Out of Power," *Commentary*, November 1965, 116-20. The significance of Goodman's work for Lasch can be gleaned in his discussion of *Growing Up Absurd* in his "The Degradation of Work, Yesterday and Today: Vital Works Reconsidered," *New Oxford Review*, October 1990, 16-19.

23. Contribution to a Symposium on "Nixon, the Great Society, and the Future of Social Policy," *Commentary* (May, 1973): 45; "The Election II," *New York Review of Books*, November 2, 1972, 6.

24. "The Conservative 'Backlash' and the Cultural Civil War," in *Neo-Conservatism: Social and Religious Phenomenon*, ed. Gregory Baum (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 8; "The Prospects for Social Democracy," *democracy* 2 (1982): 32; "Archie Bunker and the Liberal Mind" (1981), reprinted in *Fast Forward: The New Television and American Society*, ed. Les Brown and Savannah Waring Walker (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1983), 167.

Lasch did not stop here but went further—arguing that this was not only a cultural but a political issue. He pointed out in 1983 that “the working class and the lower middle class have been taxed to support programs that benefited the poor and the rich.” Some within the Democratic Party were starting to share this view at the time, as the first inklings of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) dawned. (Indeed, Clinton saw himself winning back “Middle Americans” to the Democratic Party in 1992.) To a certain extent, Lasch diagnosed a major political problem before others had caught on: that the “old Roosevelt coalition” had fallen apart. In recognizing this, Lasch paid a compliment to liberalism, albeit tempered. He pointed out that “during World War II, at the height of the liberal era, the American government achieved a modest redistribution of income...” But then he went on to condemn liberals for being so blindsided by “the Reagan Revolution”—a revolution that helped “awaken liberals to the erosion of their working-class constituency and to the depths of the disaffection with liberalism that now prevails.” The “political coalition that sustained liberalism,” as Lasch pointed out, was crucial and could no longer be jeopardized by liberals themselves without serious consequences. Interestingly enough, some within the Democratic Party were starting to agree.²⁵

It might not have seemed too big of a jump from asserting the legitimacy of working class anger at liberalism to seeing a new form of *class conflict* nurtured by liberalism, but it was a shift nonetheless. In discussing the successes of Reagan, Lasch spoke of a new “class conflict” between “new professionals and managers” and “working class and petit bourgeois” Americans. Unlike Irving Kristol who extolled Reagan, Lasch saw little more in this president’s policies than an “expansion of the market” which would lead to the rise of an “army of menial workers” due to the replacement of industrial jobs with service sector employment. Nonetheless, instead of arguing that the working class and the petit bourgeois be re-attracted to leftism or radical liberalism through coalition politics, as he had in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he now made a virtue of the working class’s cultural rejection of liberal values. In fact, he tended to sound essentialist—as if the working class embodied (in some sort of Marxist fashion) values that were in opposition to the elitism of liberals (whose politics, he now asserted, had extended from a 1920s faith in a “civilized minority”). In 1991, while the Reagan Revolution was going into a tail-spin, Lasch extolled the lower middle class as the “inheritor of a democratic tradition that always insisted that small property ownership was likely to promote the habits desirable from the point of view of democratic citizenship—responsibility, accountability, loyalty, and steadfastness.” Driving the point home and sounding uncharacteristically romantic, he explained: “They are the bearer of the American

25. “Liberalism in Retreat,” in *Liberalism Reconsidered*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Claudia Mills (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 110, 111, 105; “Why the Left Has No Future,” *Tikkun* 1 (1986): 92. See Kenneth Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 68-75, 200. For more on this overall issue, see *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

future.” This essentialist view of the working class was a far cry from the coalition politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁶

From 1968 to 1991, Lasch had made a large transformation within his thinking about questions of class and liberalism. He had started by insisting that the left needed to pay attention to working class “backlash.” His solution entailed coalition politics, that is, not accepting the working class or “middle Americans” as they were but listening to their fears while bringing them into a wider movement. On this count, he foresaw the rethinking of liberalism done by the DLC in the 1980s and some of that done by Theda Skocpol and Stanley Greenberg later in *The New Majority* (1997). But as Nixon and Reagan successfully exploited working class anger at “limousine liberalism,” Lasch hardened his critique and formulated an odd form of identity politics. It was not enough to simply listen to the working class, now critics needed to glorify its supposed virtues—virtues that liberals lacked. Values of the working class and angry reactions were now turned into virtues—very different things indeed. Unfortunately, there was little evidence for Lasch’s assertions (i.e., that the working class was any less materialistic than white collar classes, etc.), and Lasch seemed painfully aware of this. He simply pitted the working class and lower middle class against the same snobbish liberals he had condemned in 1965. But now his realism—a belief in coalition politics and a criticism of the self-romanticization of student radicals—was replaced by irrationalism—a belief that a certain class of people promised a better way of life. Lasch might have been right to condemn the snobbish tendencies of liberals, but his politics now sounded almost sentimental and ironically mired him in questions of essentialism and identity politics he otherwise abhorred.²⁷

Social Control in a Liberal Society

One of Lasch’s biggest preoccupations from the 1960s until his death was “social control.” He was troubled by questions that plagued liberal thinkers since the Enlightenment: How can citizens live in a free society that questions traditional forms of authority? What means of modern “social control” exist that allow citizens to interact peacefully with some rudimentary amount of civility? Do forms of modern social control carry with them dangers of repression? Lasch believed these

26. “Reagan’s Victims,” *New York Review of Books*, July 21, 1988, 7; the “civilized minority” analysis comes from *The True and Only Heaven*, Chapter 10; “Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue (An Interview with Nathan Gardels),” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 8 (1991): 34; see also the essentialist arguments about the working class in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 28. Interestingly enough, Lasch admitted that it was difficult to find much information about the working class’s political outlooks. He wrote to Jennifer Hochschild on May 13, 1982, “Is there anything on the political ideology of working people that you’ve found especially valuable? Indeed, is there anything you’ve found useful at all? I haven’t had much luck so far, and I’d be very grateful for suggestions.” Box 23, Folder 14.

27. For Lasch’s awareness, see his correspondence with Jennifer Hochschild in the last footnote.

questions had become more pressing in the early twentieth century when progressives faced a “decline of patriarchal authority.” Increasingly, cultural radicals and young people threw off the shackles of their parents’ past. Educational reformers like John Dewey and those who wanted to move young people out of jails into the juvenile court system, for instance, had a “confidence that ‘education’ could take the place of force. . . .” Progressives wanted to substitute older forms of domination with less coercive types of social control. The assumptions behind this project became a central concern for Lasch from the mid to late 1960s onwards.²⁸

Lasch’s work in this vein was connected directly to the New Left. After all, the New Left started to examine the *psychic* basis of authority during the 1960s. Radical psychoanalysts like Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and Paul Goodman understood that authority and power were not simply foisted upon abject citizens; rather, people internalized norms and rules via childhood experiences in patriarchal families. Feminists too asserted that male power operated at the personal level of everyday interaction—symbolized in the slogan “the personal is the political.” Finally, the counterculture rebelled against the ways the “work ethic” engrained itself in individuals’ psyches. Getting beyond “hang-ups” and prudishness—often the sort of behavior that supposedly had deep psychological roots—became central to countercultural liberation. Society would never improve, counterculture theorists argued, until individuals transformed themselves on the personal level.²⁹

The student New Left showed increasing signs of weakness due to the fissures and problems that Lasch himself pointed out during the late 1960s. Nonetheless, the belief that the personal is the political lived on in the rise of a self-help movement and new forms of group therapy during the 1970s. The historian Bruce Schulman points out that EST (Erhard Seminars Training) and other psychic programs aimed at improving self-esteem grew out of the previous belief that personal transformation needed to precede larger social change. Lasch’s best known work, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), took note of this shift. He wrote about ex-New Left radicals like Rennie Davis and Jerry Rubin turning towards therapy and described the self-help movement as beating a “retreat from politics.” While popular critics like Tom Wolfe spoke of the “me decade,” Lasch worried about something much more troubling than selfishness. He went deeper than just accounting for certain cultural trends of the 1970s. He was concerned about the disappearance of autonomous individuality that had been nurtured by the family—an arena of life that New Left psychologists and feminists had started to scrutinize.³⁰

28. *The New Radicalism*, 111, 169.

29. For more on these general issues, see Howard Brick, *The Age of Contradiction* (New York: Twayne, 1998), and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties* (New York: Bantam, 1987).

30. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 97-99; *The Culture of Narcissism*, 43, 30; see Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” in *The Purple Decades* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982). See also Paul Robinson, *The Freudian Left* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

Lasch once noted a change in his intellectual work during the 1970s, one that related to the pressures of raising his own children. During this decade, he paid more attention to questions surrounding the family—culminating in *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977). Some see Lasch's work here as an attack on feminism. Nonetheless, his interest in the subject matter was peaked by the growth of scholarship dealing with women—especially the “cult of domesticity” during the nineteenth century—often written by feminist scholars. Nor did he attack feminism. Instead, he called for balancing “the justice of the central feminist demands” against the need to defend the family. But any defense of the family raised the ire of some leftist and feminist critics. Another irony is that Lasch was starting to rearticulate a central liberal doctrine—that of individual autonomy and freedom—in his writings on the family. He was also drawing his insights from one of Western Europe's most important liberals—Sigmund Freud. In these ways, Lasch was returning to some classical precepts of liberal thought.³¹

Lasch's purpose behind examining the family was to explore the problem of internalization—much the way previous New Left psychologists had. Like the more radical psychologists who came before him, he argued that psychoanalysis provided “the most impressive body of insights into the internalization of culture.” Nonetheless, Lasch came to different conclusions, precisely because he could not find any satisfactory alternative to the family as a means to internalize authority. Within families, children confronted parents who personified both love (nurture) and authority (limits) in a very concrete (embodied) sense. Through the struggle of the Oedipus complex—whereby a child craves the love of his mother, comes to resent his father's love of his mother, and then eventually struggles to become more like the father by maturing—young boys came to be self-governing individuals. Lasch explained that a sense of justice relies on “the psychic process whereby the child internalizes the authority of his father and his culture in such a way that it becomes his own, thereby furnishing a standard against which to weigh and even to condemn authority, imposed from outside, including that of the father.”³²

Certainly Lasch saw the limits of patriarchal control, and he tried to distinguish his concern with internalization from a nostalgic call to return to the past. Lasch admitted that the bourgeois family of the nineteenth century produced “guilt” as well as “the capacity for independent thought and judgment.” He knew full well that the bourgeois family was implicated in sustaining capitalism—something his residual leftism condemned. He explained that his discussion of the family should not “be misunderstood as a lament for old-fashioned individualism, a plea for the restoration of old-fashioned authority, or a demand for the revival of some earlier form of

31. *The True and Only Heaven*, 25, 34; *The World of Nations*, 38. Lasch explained that feminism had sparked his interest in the family in “The Family and History,” *New York Review of Books*, November 13, 1975, 33 and *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977; New York: Basic Books, 1979), xvi.

32. *Haven in a Heartless World*, 150; “The Waning of Private Life,” *Salmagundi*, 36 (1977): 5-6.

the family. Predatory individualism was attractive only in its by-products." Lasch believed that feminist demands could reform the older bourgeois family structure. But he never believed that society could transcend the need for intact families since they helped insure individualism and hence self-governance. For instance, he never expressed hope in communal societies (the kibbutzim) or professional day care (the hope of some feminists), and he seemed personally saddened when friends told him about their divorces. The family's role in facilitating the sort of freedom necessary for democracy was paramount: "In analyzing the transformation of the family... we are at the same time analyzing the weakening of the psychic basis of democracy—the self-reliant, autonomous, inner-directed individual."³³

Why this growing defense of the family? Precisely because Lasch saw a new form of personality disorder that correlated with the weakening of the traditional family. This was what Lasch called the "narcissistic personality type" during the 1970s (as early as 1975) and then the "minimal self" during the 1980s. The threat of narcissism was not selfishness, although at times during the 1970s Lasch could suggest such. The major problem with this new personality type was its inability to internalize authority. Lasch described the narcissist in 1975 as "cynically indifferent to the claim of authority but incapable of resisting authority in the name of a higher principle internalized as conscience." As he would explain later, narcissism, as a stage of psychological development "precedes the emergence of the ego," precisely the rational and autonomous component within the Freudian typology of the personality. For these reasons of personality formation, Lasch feared the invasion of the family by outside forces. He saw the problems of narcissism manifesting themselves in American culture more broadly: the power of the peer group in young people's lives, the rise of mass advertising that prompted individual insecurities, the "flight from feeling" and "promiscuity" that suggested an inability to make long-term commitments. There were very serious consequences to all of these developments—namely an inability on the part of many people to internalize authority and hence an inability to make autonomous judgments and decisions. Lasch tried to make these concerns clear in what became his best-selling book, *The Culture of Narcissism*.³⁴

Unfortunately, the public read the book as a jeremiad against selfishness. Lasch found himself having to write another book on much the same subject matter in

33. "The Waning of Private Life," 9, 13, 15. For Lasch's critique of the "collectivization of childbearing," see "A Society without Fathers: Cooperative Commonwealth or Harmonious Ant Heap?" in *Face to Face: Fathers, Mothers, Masters, Monsters—Essays for a Nonsexist Future*, ed. Meg McGavran Murray (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 3.

34. "What the Doctor Ordered," *New York Review of Books*, December 11, 1975, 54; *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984; New York: Norton, 1985), 182; *The Culture of Narcissism*, 338-9. For his criticism of the peer group, see *Haven in a Heartless World*, 58. Just how *The Culture of Narcissism* became a best-seller is confusing. The book is difficult to read and its reliance on European intellectual traditions would seem to have made it inaccessible to American readers. Lasch too was confused by the success of the book, as he expressed it in an interview: "Gratification Now is the Slogan of the 70s, Laments a Historian," *People*, July 9, 1979, 34-6. The title of this interview shows just how Lasch was being misunderstood.

order to clarify his arguments. The result was *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984), a book that more fully developed arguments that had been embryonic during the 1970s. In fact, Lasch's arguments about selfhood remain crucial today and can help buttress a liberal, psychological vision of democratic citizenship (in many ways, they draw from the work of the liberal social theorist, David Riesman, and his conception of autonomy). Psychoanalysis still played the leading role in framing Lasch's view of mature selfhood at this point. More specifically, he had grown increasingly interested in the recent writings of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel on the "ego ideal." This component of the personality distinguished itself from the superego—the punitive residuals of internalized parental authority. As Lasch had already pointed out, narcissists had developed a "harsh and punitive superego," thus leaving him cold about the conservative call to strengthen it as a source of social control. Lasch described the ego ideal as the "internalized representations of parental authority" that were "admired, idealized images of parents." The ego ideal could serve as a projected image that counteracted the child's early wishes and that could serve as a model for long-term development towards maturity. As Lasch himself put it, the "ego ideal can follow either the short, direct, and regressive road marked out by the Nirvana principle"—a sense of oneness found in the womb and very early childhood when all needs were immediately satisfied—"or the long and difficult road of maturation and development." The second path resulted in Lasch's own ideal of mature selfhood—the result being "a recognition of one's need for and dependence on people who nevertheless remain separate from oneself and refuse to submit to one's whims." The ego ideal thus held out the possibility of psychological autonomy, coupled with a sense of limits, as against the mere internalization of punitive parental demands found in the superego.³⁵

This resulting autonomy—a recognition of connectedness to one's past and parental authority while achieving independent critical judgment—was much in line with Freud's definition of selfhood. Lasch appreciated Freud's belief that "the human condition" entailed a certain amount of psychic frustration. He believed psychoanalysis offered a "critique of human pretensions" and could provide Americans with a "definition of selfhood as tension, division, and conflict." But Lasch was concerned with more than definitions of psychological health. He believed that a "core of selfhood not subject to environmental determination . . . remains a potential source of democratic renewal. . . ." Indeed, he argued stridently that "political freedom itself rests on a sense of selfhood that is growing more and more difficult to sustain." To a certain extent, Lasch sounded almost Kantian here—asserting the need for a morally

35. *The Minimal Self*, 178; *The Culture of Narcissism*, 305; "Introduction" to *The Ego Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal* by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (New York: Norton, 1985), xii; *Minimal Self*, 177-8. Louis Menand in his "Christopher Lasch's Quarrel with Liberalism" notes that Lasch never cited any of Freud's cultural work (especially taking note of *Civilization and its Discontents*). Though this is true, he nevertheless got to the same conclusions by reading Freud's clinical case studies and theoretical works.

autonomous individual capable of making judgments that transcended self-interest. But he countered this liberal tendency with his increasing appreciation of political theorists like Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre who stressed the importance of participating in the public life of the polis (to a certain extent, a reassertion of the New Left's vision of participatory politics). If the family helped nurture autonomous individuals, local communities provided spaces where they could become reengaged in political decision-making with fellow citizens. With "the collapse of the visionary politics of the new left," Lasch argued for a "revival of the family and voluntary associations" as the basis for democratic politics.³⁶

If family and local community life were important areas in which to nurture mature selfhood (what I would call liberal selfhood), something needed to be done to protect them against existing threats. And here is where Lasch distinguished himself from conservatives. As he explained in *Haven in a Heartless World*, he was most concerned with "the invasion of the family by the marketplace and the street" and the "calculating manipulative spirit that has long been ascendant in business life." If the market was not the solution to the cultural problems that Lasch was confronting, was there a *political* solution? That possibility culminated in one of the odder turns in Lasch's intellectual biography—his support of Jimmy Carter and his 1979 visit to the White House.³⁷

From the beginning, Lasch saw Carter as an important political figure, describing him, in a letter to Eugene Genovese, as "the most intelligent politician to have risen to national prominence in a long time." Carter himself read *The Culture of Narcissism* while president and grew enamored with the book's arguments. For this reason, Lasch found himself at a White House dinner on May 30, 1979, a bit before Carter's famous—some might say infamous—"malaise speech," a speech once intended to address the energy crisis but that turned into a general lament about Americans' civic disaffection. Lasch seemed genuinely hopeful that Carter was calling for not just a return to traditional values (i.e., the family) but also to more participation on the part of ordinary citizens in waging a war on the energy crisis. Both things pointed to the possibilities of partnerships between local activities of citizens and the federal government and a sense of limits. But it was Carter's call for citizens to make sacrifices—most famously to turn down their thermostats—that also made

36. "Sacrificing Freud," *New York Times Magazine*, February 22, 1976, 72; Comments made in "A Typology of Intellectuals: III. Melanie Klein, Psychoanalysis, and the Revival of Public Philosophy," *Salmagundi* 70-71 (1986): 213; *Minimal Self*, 258, 59; "1984: Are We There?" *Salmagundi* 65 (1984): 62. It should be pointed out that Lasch held onto his psychoanalytic vision of mature selfhood as far as 1990 (and perhaps beyond). In 1990 he called for "moral realism," after citing Freud, that would make "it possible for human beings to come to terms with existential constraints on [our] power and freedom." "The Culture of Narcissism Revisited," 523; *Haven in a Heartless World*, xv. Lasch would later argue for the need to recreate some form of petty proprietorship as the basis of citizenship. What seems more "liberal" about Lasch's call for mature selfhood during the 1980s is that he believes it could be nurtured by families and local communities and thus would not require republican conceptions of petty proprietorship.

37. *Haven in a Heartless World*, 166.

Lasch slightly uncomfortable (those who call this speech “Lasch-inspired,” as Alan Ryan does, miss this point). As Lasch expressed it to Patrick Caddell, the President’s pollster and key organizer of the dinner that Lasch attended, “The question is whether sacrifices will be imposed on the public by an elite that still manages to monopolize most of the power and wealth, exhorting others to prodigies of austerity while itself living high on the hog. . . .” Though Lasch described Carter’s speech as “courageous, powerful, and often moving,” in the end, he felt that the president had not done enough to confront unequal power dynamics. Feeling that the administration did not listen to his criticisms (and all the evidence points to this conclusion), Lasch became increasingly disillusioned with Carter.³⁸

Nonetheless, Carter had charted a new course during his presidency. And while the Reagan Revolution was carried out, the DLC grew interested in returning to some elements within Carter’s vision by developing policies more favorable towards family life and citizen participation. In fact, Clinton spoke openly about his support of the traditional family and older notions of civic obligation, and he eventually passed a national service bill and flexi-time legislation that tried to favor family life. Lasch himself saw two different possibilities in the Clinton administration—Hillary Clinton’s “childsaving” tendencies that stressed the invasion of the family (i.e., her defense of children’s “rights”), and another that saw the need to defend the family against economic decline. Towards the end of his life, Lasch held onto the need for “restructuring of the workplace designed to make work schedules far more flexible” in order that parents would have time for their children. This was something that Clinton himself believed in.³⁹

Did Lasch have political solutions to the problems he outlined? The answer, of course, depended on how he defined the problems. What exactly was a cultural or political problem was not always clear to Lasch, and he seemed to be comfortable with this ambiguity. Nonetheless, the sinister side of therapeutic social control drew Lasch’s attention over the years and counteracted hope for political change. It was here that he began to break with any hope to reform liberalism in order to correct for its abuses. It is here that there is a certain “bleakness” to Lasch’s thought, as Alan Ryan has pointed out. There was a curious intellectual source for this—namely Michel Foucault. In the early 1970s, Lasch argued that Foucault was a “brilliant” intellectual

38. Lasch in a letter to Jody Powell, dated June 10, 1979 and another letter to Pat Caddell dated July 18, 1979, found in the Lasch Papers, Box 20, Folder 6; Alan Ryan, “The Prophet,” *New York Review of Books*, November 6, 1997, 47. For more background, see also Elizabeth Drew, “A Reporter at Large: Phase: In Search of a Definition,” *New Yorker*, August 27, 1979, 45-73; “Reshaping of Carter’s Presidency,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1979, 1, 30; and more generally William Leuchtenberg’s essay in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

39. “The Siege of the Family,” *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 1977, 15; *Revolt of the Elites*, 113; “Hillary Clinton, Child Saver,” *Harper’s*, October 1992: 74-82. See Kenneth Baer, *Reinventing Democrats* for Clinton’s pro-family stances. For Lasch’s disenchantment with the Carter administration, see “Democracy and the Crisis of Confidence,” *democracy* 1 (1981): 26.

whose explorations showed how liberal reform “created new forms of repression.” He also praised Jacques Donzelot, a sociologist who worked in the vein of Foucault and who analyzed how the “policing of families” was carried out by an army of social workers, therapists, and other experts. Both thinkers worked from the perspective of France’s post-structuralist left, a slightly odd inspiration for Lasch’s social criticism. Still something of a Marxist when he discovered Donzelot, Lasch took note of his argument that the “attempt to control the poor” also served “to counter socialist propaganda.” In other words, “the directors of the therapeutic state” had “pacified a formerly rebellious population. . . .” Lasch followed Donzelot in believing that policing agencies of the state—especially social workers and therapists—*propped up* capitalist relations (and would therefore seem to be secondary actors to the primary causal factors of the economy), but Lasch’s analysis focused most of its attention on the inordinate power of *state-funded* actors. As much as he had argued in *Haven in a Heartless World* that the family was threatened by the market, his use of French sources—where there was a much stronger welfare state—seemed to push him in another direction, towards making the state the culprit.⁴⁰

Here was a tension in Lasch’s social thought that helps explain the changing nature of his political views. Much of it came back to questions of class explored earlier—especially those surrounding the “new class.” In 1980, Lasch criticized a “neo-conservative interpretation” that “views the rise of the therapeutic state as the unconditional triumph of centralized control and of the progressive intelligentsia or ‘new class.’” But in the next breath, Lasch discussed a “managerial and professional elite” that had substituted “bureaucratic and medical controls for direct legislative controls over the family.” Lasch was not clear how much power the new class and the therapeutic state really had. Others tried to get him to clarify the issue. At one moment, for instance, a social worker from England complained about Lasch’s interpretation of the therapeutic state. In his response, Lasch defended his views on “social control” and betrayed a certain amount of fuzziness about his diagnosis of the problem. First, Lasch claimed that social workers had an enormous amount of power: “Vague and undefined notions of ‘injury’ and ‘neglect’ have been indefinitely expanded to include almost anything an investigator finds morally offensive or contrary to social usage.” The terms “indefinitely expanded” betrayed a certain paranoia (the sort found in much of Foucault’s work). Lasch also stressed how the therapeutic state had promoted a *permissive* ethic. But then he discussed a case in which a child was transferred out of a home because the mother was “living with a man to whom she was not legally married” and was thus accused of “sexual ‘promiscuity.’” The example—a common one in Lasch’s mind—did not depict a permissive new class at all but rather prudishness (a hang-up with marriage and the

40. Alan Ryan, “The Prophet,” 51. Review of Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, *New York Times Book Review*, February 24, 1974, 6; *World of Nations*, 6; “Life in the Therapeutic State” (1980), reprinted in *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism* (New York: Norton, 1997), 178, 183.

traditional family in fact). Just after discussing this case, Lasch then went on to conclude that his society was ruled by “value free social science,” which seemed to suggest another take on the problem altogether.⁴¹

Of course, some might argue that this was simply an example where Lasch did not argue his best case. But I believe it says more. It illustrates a deeper problem in Lasch's analysis of “social control” and the “therapeutic state.” The most obvious problem was that Lasch staked out a blurry line between removing children from homes for legitimate and illegitimate reasons. The idea that reasons for removal could be “indefinitely expanded” suggested that the idea of removal itself—and those bureaucracies and social workers carrying it out—had to be called into question. This seemed the upshot of his debate with the British social worker. Another problem though was larger and came about due to a shift in Lasch's social thought. As he threw away the Marxist residuals in his social thought (many of which were not all that well-defined when he clung to them in the first place) and found himself quarrelling with the left and feminists about his views on the family during the 1970s and 1980s, Donzelot's critique of the “policing of the families” became divorced from its left-leaning roots—that is, the idea that social policing disciplined the poor in the interest of capitalism. Once Marxism disappeared, Lasch's critique became more akin to the neoconservative view of the therapeutic state that he had earlier criticized. Even as early as 1980, Lasch pointed his finger at an army of “social workers, psychiatrists, educators, marriage counselors” as the basis of a therapeutic state. It was difficult to see, except in the most abstract terms, how exactly these agents propped up corporate power. It now seemed that the critique of the therapeutic state led to some necessarily (neo) conservative conclusions.

Lasch's critique of therapeutic social control became more vague and conservative towards the end of his life. It sounded less like it could be corrected for by limiting the power of social workers or asserting the bill of rights (as he once argued), and more like it was too engrained in modern, secular culture. Lasch seemed less willing to entertain the possibility, as he did in 1980, that new forms of “social discipline” failed to work in creating a compliant set of citizens. Here is where Lasch started to flirt with the idea that only a return to religion—something that he never fully explained or even explored due to his life being cut short—could serve as a solution to the problem. In reviewing Philip Rieff's work in 1990, he edged closer to this sort of sentiment, “The vacuum left by secularization has been filled by a permissive culture that replaces the concept of sin with the concept of sickness.” In the same review, Lasch made the power of therapeutic culture sound all-pervasive (the same way Foucault talked of power): “The habit of forbearance, once having estab-

41. “Historic Subversion of the Family,” *Psychology Today*, March 1980, 111; “Democracy vs. Therapy,” *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 1980, 68. Lasch was interested enough in the idea of a new class to think seriously about editing a book on the topic matter, going so far as to round up contributors. See his letter to Jean Christophe Agnew, dated January 2, 1984: Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 3.

lished itself as the first principle of psychiatric therapy, soon became a kind of automatic reflex regulating all forms of interpersonal exchange." If therapeutic social control had become this pervasive, it no longer seemed something that could be combated politically. It seemed more to mark the "soul of man under secularism," as one of his later essays put it. It is this element in his later social thought that some critics pick up on, rightfully, to claim that Lasch had become more conservative.⁴²

By this point, Lasch had taken the concept of therapeutic social control and extended it much further than previously. The new class appeared more powerful than it had in his earlier writing. This only drove him on to seek out some agency that could resist therapeutic social control, leading him to embrace the working and lower middle classes. The rooting of therapeutic social control back in the original tendency to secularize society led Lasch to stress only the dark side of modernity. No longer satisfied with Freud, a thinker who could see both the benefits and problems of modernity, Lasch now embraced Rieff and the pessimistic tendencies within Foucault's gloomy depiction of modernity. This was "bleakness" indeed.

Alternatives: Towards a Civic Liberalism?

While spelling out an almost one-dimensional view of modernity, Lasch held on to the possibility that there was an alternative to the therapeutic social control. This could be found in the political promise of decentralization and community control—the vision that accompanied his earlier defense of the family and that, once again, was also having influence on the Democratic Leadership Council. Turning to his search for alternatives, it is interesting to note that in 1971 Lasch had questioned the limitations of the New Left's ideal of participatory democracy. Here again he shared something in common with a "radical liberal" like Arnold Kaufman who had done much to develop the idea of participatory democracy during the late 1950s and early 1960s but started to question its misapplication and overuse during the later 1960s. Like Kaufman, Lasch argued that "the idea of 'participatory democracy,' while it may have served initially as a necessary corrective to the bureaucratic centralism so long associated with parties of the left, rapidly degenerated into political primitivism, the old dream of a primary democracy without factions or parties—in other words, of a political community without politics." Lasch made clear that participatory democracy helped explain an overall problem of New Left political philosophy—namely, romanticism.⁴³

42. "Response: History in America," *Salmagundi*, no. 50-51, 1980-1, 190; "Philip Rieff and the Religion of Culture" (1990), reprinted in *The Revolt of the Elites*, 216, 218; "The Soul of Man Under Secularism," in *The Revolt of the Elites*. For the "bill of rights" argument, see "The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State," in *The Future of Our Liberties: Perspectives on the Bill of Rights*, ed. Stephen Halpern (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).

43. "After the New Left" (1971), in *The World of Nations*, 148. For Kaufman's development and later critique of "participatory democracy," see *Intellectuals in Action*, Chapter Five.

This did not lead him to question decentralized socialism—a vision that he developed in the late 1960s and seemed to cling to throughout the 1970s. In many ways, decentralized socialism could make up for the weakness of participatory democracy: it allowed for local control and democracy but at the same time envisioned governmental power strong enough to correct for social injustices. Once again, Lasch's political vision shared a great deal with Irving Howe, Michael Harrington, and Arnold Kaufman. As late as 1979, Lasch explained, "The solution to our problems lies in a completion of the democratic movement inaugurated in the eighteenth century, not in a retreat to a pre-democratic way of life. Socialism, notwithstanding the horrors committed in its name, still represents the legitimate heir of liberal democracy." But as Lasch started to question Marxism and depicted therapeutic social control in starker terms, he started to draw a sharper line between "bureaucracy" and "community control." Already by 1977, even when still a Marxist, Lasch emphasized a rigid opposition between local control and bureaucracy: "Strengthen the citizen," he argued, "not the state; above all, avoid the creation of new bureaucracies." He sounded as if the ties between government and citizens needed to be held to a minimum and cut back in fact: "In order to break the existing pattern of dependence and stop the erosion of competence, citizens must take the solution of their problems—the deterioration of childcare for example—into their own hands. They must create their own agencies of collective self-help." Though still espousing decentralized socialism, it would seem that the sort of bureaucracy this vision would entail (how could there be socialism without at least *some* national coordination and bureaucracy?) could not be supported by the later 1970s.⁴⁴

At times, Lasch seemed to veer towards an almost anti-statist politics. Indeed, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, he verged on celebrating "voter apathy," suggesting that this form of civic alienation symbolized a rejection of "the political system of prefabricated spectacles." He argued against liberals like Walter Dean Burnham who wanted to revive a social democratic tendency within the Democratic Party by pointing out that political disaffection had done too much damage for such an idealistic solution to work. Lasch asserted, "The welfare state has turned the citizen into a client. The citizen's participation in politics has been limited to the single act of casting a vote, and his refusal to perform this vestigial rite of democracy cannot be reduced to his perception that neither party represents his interests." From here, it was easy to celebrate the radical decentralization of power (or really the spread of the market's prioritization of choice) found in home schooling and vouchers—two policies that Lasch seemed to support in 1991. Localism could lead to "cutting the knot" between the welfare state and citizens, the way conservative intellectuals like Charles Murray had suggested during the Reagan

44. For Lasch's theory of decentralized socialism, see *The Agony of the American Left*, 211; "Politics and Social Theory: A Reply to the Critics" (1979), reprinted in *The Salmagundi Reader*, ed. Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 183; "The Siege of the Family," 18.

Revolution. Once again, Lasch seemed to push himself later in life into an inherently conservative political position.⁴⁵

At the least, Lasch's penchant for localism made him favorable towards communitarian political philosophy during the 1980s. In 1986, he called communitarianism "one of the most hopeful developments in our recent history." Lasch especially appreciated the call to "human scale"—the reassertion of New Left localism, as he explained it—by communitarians. He also expressed interest in an "Aristotelian conception of politics" that grew out of reading Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), a book that had a profound impact on Lasch. He liked the Aristotelian emphasis on practical reason and the agonistic tendencies of debate within the polis. But he was not as favorable towards theorists who focused on a communitarian conception of the self—that is, an attempt to find an alternative to liberal individualism. His own conception of selfhood militated against such a move. Lasch instead wanted a "conception of politics that is neither communitarian nor individualistic" and that "recognizes the boundary between the self and others." As he put it later, "political life thrives on controversy." Thus, some elements within communitarianism—especially any tendency to become nostalgic about *gemeinschaft*—became apolitical. Lasch liked conflict and tension too much to submerge the self into an organic community. He started to label his political philosophy "populist" rather than "communitarian."⁴⁶

Lasch's discomfort with communitarianism might have led him towards a populist world-view but it also made clear that he had not fully given up on the liberal tendencies within his own thought. Lasch was too complex of a thinker (no matter what critics like Stephen Holmes suggest) to caricature the liberal tradition. Indeed, he knew that some liberal political thinkers appreciated localism. After all, Herbert Croly had celebrated the syndicalist vision of self-governing economic units as much as the welfare state. John Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* defended the need for deliberation in local communities (as Lasch's colleague, Robert Westbrook, never stopped making clear to him). Lasch also had a healthy fear that localism could degenerate into balkanization and separatism (something Arthur Schlesinger pointed out in the early 1990s). For instance, while he had been very favorable towards black nationalism in the late 1960s, he started to become very critical of its

45. *The Culture of Narcissism*, 20-1; "The Prospects for Social Democracy," 31; "The Fragility of Liberalism," *Salmagundi* 92 (1991): 17, 18. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

46. "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Soundings* 69 (1986): 60; "Introduction," (to a series of articles on Hannah Arendt), *Salmagundi* 60 (1983): xi; "Fraternalist Manifesto," *Harper's*, April 1987, 20; *True and Only Heaven*, 166. Lasch liked MacIntyre's book, *After Virtue*, but it is not clear if he agreed with its conception of teleological selfhood (that is, a more ancient vision of the self versus the modern, utilitarian conception that MacIntyre critiqued). Lasch admitted that, "I can't claim fully to have assimilated the argument" (quoted in Eric Miller, "Radical Vision," 242, n 58). One thing is clear, though, MacIntyre embraced conflict and tried to rid the Aristotelian tradition of its residual view of harmonious selfhood: See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 163-64.

shift towards identity politics during the 1970s. In 1978, Lasch asserted there was a “promise of American pluralism” that allowed different groups to manage their local affairs; unfortunately, that localism could slip into “the mystique of ‘Black is beautiful’” and unproductive separatism. Towards the end of his life, Lasch famously lashed out against a tendency among elites to form self-governing private communities—showing that his support of localism was checked by a concern for a wider public good that transcended the well-being of local communities.⁴⁷

It was this element in his later life that pushed him towards a vision of what I would call “civic liberalism.” Lasch admitted to the influence of thinkers like Michael Walzer and Mickey Kaus (the former a social democrat, the latter a New Democrat). Eschewing libertarian conservatism or welfare state bureaucracy, Lasch argued, “It is increasingly clear that we need to reinvigorate forms of public life that are independent of the market and the state alike.” Lasch believed Clinton did the right thing by ending welfare “as a way of life.” But he disliked Clinton’s embrace of “neoliberalism” that turned citizens into consumers and only focused on the market; rather, Lasch upheld a renewal of the “public world” where “citizens” would be “nurtured in a tradition of civic equality.” In sorting through the different tendencies within Clinton’s New Democratic philosophy, Lasch hit upon civic liberalism (Kaus’s book had an impact on some within the Clinton administration). Lasch quoted approvingly Kaus’s call to “create a sphere of life in which money is devalued, to prevent those who have money from concluding they are superior.” The goal now was to improve and nurture local civic associations that could challenge the domination of elites and markets. Though Lasch did not go into details, Kaus himself suggested such policies as national public service, campaign finance reform, health care reform, and day care (Lasch would certainly have substituted flexi-time for the last suggestion). Interestingly enough, Lasch touted much of what Kaus had to say and then argued for the need to “limit” wealth accumulation itself. He suggested in an interview that he never gave up on the “progressive income tax,” a central liberal principal. He hoped instead that voluntary civic associations within local communities—what increasingly became known during the 1990s as “civil society”—could be balanced against programs aimed at redistribution of income. In certain ways, Lasch seemed almost more “liberal” than New Democrats like Mickey Kaus.⁴⁸

It is easy to see that Lasch faced a paradox in his political thought. This was the major dead-end, so to speak, which makes his connection to the liberal tradition,

47. *The True and Only Heaven*, 207-08; “America Between Covers,” *The Nation*, December 2, 1978, 619; see the leading essay in *The Revolt of the Elites* for his criticism of elites forming their own communities. For his original support of black nationalism, see the essay on Harold Cruse in *The Agony of the American Left*.

48. “Tried and Found Wanting,” *Commonweal*, September 25, 1992, 26; “The Culture of Poverty and the Culture of ‘Compassion,’” *Salmagundi*, 98-99 (1993): 3, 8; *The Revolt of the Elites*, 21, 22; “An Interview with Christopher Lasch,” *Telos* 97 (1993): 132. The term “civic liberalism” is Mickey Kaus’s: See his *The End of Equality* (1992; New York: Basic Books, 1995).

even at this late stage, clearer. He wanted decentralization and local community control, yet at the same time argued for a government that was strong enough to promise income redistribution. He liked pluralism but disliked separatism. He pledged himself to local community control but condemned the wealthy for living within gated communities with “private police” and “private and suburban schools.” Lasch had a difficult time squaring these two tendencies within his own thinking. At a roundtable held towards the end of his life, he confronted the paradox. He argued, “We need both social programs and self-help in order to revitalize communities that are disintegrating.” He called for a “huge jobs program” in order to attack socio-economic inequality yet feared “social engineering” and bureaucracy. This was the paradox of Lasch’s political outlook during the 1990s. It was a paradox that stemmed from a legitimate desire to square democratic participation and social equality—a paradox central to the liberal tradition itself.⁴⁹

The Possibilities of a Chastened Liberalism

Lasch’s criticisms of liberalism were multi-faceted and drew upon a variety of sources. Later in life, he argued that his political philosophy moved beyond the division of left and right, and certainly his variegated criticisms of liberalism bear this out. From communitarian critics, he learned how to decry liberalism’s “lack of a public philosophy” and its inability to develop “an adequate idea of the common good.” He wrote, “Liberalism assumes that men and women wish only to pursue their private purpose.” Thus liberalism led directly to the “privatization of the good life.” From republican political theorists, who shared a great deal with communitarians, Lasch took the idea that liberalism chose to “dispense with civic virtue” and had become too proceduralist (Michael Sandel’s term). Communitarian and republican sources influenced Lasch and helped him push beyond the traditional right and left critiques of the liberal tradition.⁵⁰

But there were other sources for Lasch’s criticism of liberalism that sounded ultimately conservative. For instance, he believed in the need to understand “the degree to which liberal democracy has lived off the borrowed capital of moral and religious traditions antedating the rise of liberalism.” Elsewhere, he argued that liberalism “presupposed” non-liberal (i.e., traditional) forms of life and institutions, including “religion and the traditional family and local community.” Indeed, this side of his critique stemmed largely from frustration with defending his views on the

49. *The Revolt of the Elites*, 47; comments found within “Race and Racism: American Dilemmas Revisited,” *Salmagundi* 104-5 (1994-5): 137, 140.

50. “Liberalism in Retreat,” 105; “Democracy and the ‘Crisis of Confidence,’” 35; “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” 73; “The Fragility of Liberalism,” 14, 10; “Politics and Morality: The Deadlock of Left and Right,” in *Guaranteeing the Good Life: Medicine and the Return of Eugenics*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 61.

family against leftist and feminist critics from the mid 1970s onwards. Liberalism, he suggested, failed to recognize how it needed institutions and ways of life that it had no ability to defend—that it, in fact, often criticized. Sometimes, Lasch sounded like Edmund Burke (or perhaps Russell Kirk), defending organic traditions against those who wanted to abolish them or at least downplay their importance. This side of Lasch's social thought can be chalked up to his frustrating debates with liberals and progressives during the 1980s and 1990s or can be seen as the logical conclusion to his growing cultural conservatism, including his older suspicions about "welfare liberalism" and the culture of poverty as well as his new ponderings about the ethics of abortion.⁵¹

Another tendency that informed Lasch's critique of liberalism grew out of a New Left tendency. At first, this could be seen in his suspicions about the limits of "corporate liberalism." In the early 1970s, Lasch discussed how the managerial class had "developed a variant of liberalism, best described as corporate liberalism and exemplified in progressivism, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society." In 1973, Lasch argued that this form of liberalism "attacked symptoms rather than causes." Of course, this criticism dissipated as Lasch's Marxism dissipated. To a certain degree though, this New Left tendency reasserted itself during the late 1980s and early 1990s as Lasch criticized liberals' substitution of "distributive democracy" for "participatory democracy." Lasch believed liberals concerned themselves far too much with redistributing income rather than seeking out ways to share power by making politics more participatory—that is, grounded in the local activities of self-governing communities. This did not sound too different from the critique that SDS had mounted in the early 1960s.⁵²

A primary element of his critique related to another New Left residual—namely, environmentalism. When Lasch complained that liberalism cherished growth and "economic expansion," the influence was clear. Lasch argued that liberals had no appreciation of "limits." One example he cited was the pro-choice movement, which seemed to push the philosophy of limits in a rightward direction, but the real source of his critique was the ecology movement's warning about the exhaustion of natural resources. Complaining that liberalism was "predicated on unlimited economic expansion," Lasch would have found few friends among free market conservatives or

51. *The Revolt of the Elites*, 86; "Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue," 31. For an example of Lasch sounding like Edmund Burke, see his "A Response to Fishcer," *Tikkun* 3 (1988): 72. It seems that a number of debates he had in *Tikkun* during this time pushed Lasch to sound more conservative in his views. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch wrote that "welfare liberalism . . . absolves individuals of moral responsibility and treats them as victims of social circumstances" (*The Culture of Narcissism*, 369). Lasch's appreciation of the right-wing critique of abortion is expressed in "An Interview with Christopher Lasch," 130.

52. "Toward a Theory of Post-Industrial Society," in *Politics in the Post-Welfare State*, ed. N. Donald Hancock and Gideon Sjöberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 39; Contribution to a Symposium on "Nixon, the Great Society, and the Future of Social Policy," 45; "A Response to Joel Feinberg," *Tikkun* 3 (1988): 42; *The True and Only Heaven*, 343.

libertarians. Limits upon economic growth certainly required some sort of regulatory state capable of enforcing a more thoughtful approach to the environment (indeed, one of the first to articulate a connection between liberalism and environmentalism and call for “limits” was the Cold War liberal John Kenneth Galbraith).⁵³

Lasch’s appreciation of civic liberalism also showed how much he shared with the rethinking of liberalism done by liberals themselves, especially those within the DLC. Lasch had always been worried about the potential loss of the “New Deal coalition.” In 1973, he warned that “liberal reforms tend to be politically self-defeating . . . because they seek only to redistribute inequality instead of eliminating it.” He worried that “liberal reformers are constantly dividing their own constituencies.” Lasch never stopped making this argument; as we have seen, it only became more prominent in his political thought during the Reagan Revolution. Indeed, Lasch kept on chastising liberals for their snobbish qualities from 1965 to 1994—certainly one of the constants in his political thought. When the DLC attacked the liberal elitism found in “new politics” liberals, they sounded a great deal like Lasch. No wonder that Lasch came to appreciate some of what this wing of the Democratic Party had to offer (and no wonder that Lasch voted for Clinton in 1992).⁵⁴

In whole, Lasch questioned liberalism to the point that there seemed very little defensive about the tradition; on this point, Stephen Holmes and other critics seem right. While Lasch could speak of the “strengths and weaknesses of traditional liberalism,” at other times he made blanket rejections. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, for instance, he declared: “Politically bankrupt, liberalism is intellectually bankrupt as well.” In debating progressives he often deliberately raised their ire (calling, for instance, for making divorce illegal), if only because he had grown defensive about the attacks made on him from the left. But at the same time, his views of liberalism became a bit more complex in the late 1980s and 1990s. He admitted that those working in republican theory had generated a “caricature of liberalism.” There had been, in his own words, a “belated discovery that even liberals, after all, had reservations about acquisitive individualism.” Here was the other side of rejecting political categorization—an ability to see the multiple dimensions of liberalism. In some ways, he returned to the realist dimension of his earlier thought by arguing that “liberalism does not take a very generous view of human nature. It sees mankind as essentially acquisitive and self-seeking. . . .” This would seem to open up questions about Lasch’s other attacks on liberalism as naïve and optimistic about progress. Lasch’s appreciation of how difficult it was to classify Tom Paine’s political philosophy—which seemed to meld bourgeois individualism and republicanism—showed how the classifications of liberalism and republicanism themselves were open to question. Lasch’s sympathy for William James’s “moral equivalent of war” argu-

53. “Liberalism in Retreat,” 106; *The True and Only Heaven*, 529; “The Fragility of Liberalism,” 7.

54. Contribution to a Symposium on “Nixon, the Great Society, and the Future of Social Policy,” 45.

ment suggested he understood how liberals could hope to find substitutes for older ways of ensuring civic virtue (and that liberals saw the need for such a project). It was not always clear if Lasch had truly given up on the liberal tradition. The interview given towards the end of his life, which stands as the epigraph for this essay, suggests he may not have.⁵⁵

Perhaps most important in this context is Lasch's own inability to get beyond liberalism—either its nineteenth (classical) or twentieth (modern) century variety. For instance, he was never comfortable with allowing social and economic inequalities to go unchecked. When, towards the end of his life, he called for a massive jobs program to correct for socio-economic problems, he made this evident (how could local communities actually carry out such an endeavor?). He never gave up on the need for open democratic debate; his appreciation of contestation and disagreement suggested he was more comfortable with liberal philosophy than with some elements within communitarianism, those dreams for organic unity that critics like Stephen Holmes rightfully chastise. Lasch never gave up on a belief in individual autonomy, even if he jettisoned the Freudian basis to his original argument. Nor did he ever give up on the necessity of protecting and nurturing civic associations—the sort that the liberal political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had celebrated and many contemporary liberals continue to cherish.

To a large extent, though he was critical of liberalism, it is not clear that Lasch ever entirely left the tradition behind. Though Lasch wound up in certain intellectual dead-ends—especially his fetish of working class virtues and his neglect of modernity's positive features alongside its darker ones—there is much to learn from his critique. First, Lasch was largely correct in criticizing an elitist tendency within modern liberalism. The threat of liberals becoming a “civilized minority” became only too clear during the 1970s and 1980s, as those who struggled with the realities of “backlash” against “limousine liberalism” have recognized (again, some of these struggles occurred within the Democratic Party). Nonetheless, Lasch's tendency to glorify the supposed virtues of the petty bourgeois and working classes seems an unnecessary step. Not only is it difficult empirically to validate the assumption that the lower classes represent a different value system, there is a danger in identity politics of any sort—be it the New Left's frantic search to find an “agency” for change during the late 1960s (which shifted from students as a new working class to African Americans to Third World revolutionaries to the lumpenproletariat) or Lasch's celebration of the petit-bourgeois. Any essentialist and identity-based critique reduces

55. *The World of Nations*, xi; *The Culture of Narcissism*, 18; *The True and Only Heaven*, 197; “Politics and Morality: The Deadlock of Left and Right,” 58. During a rare moment, Lasch admitted that the debates he had been having with liberals and progressives during the 1980s and 1990s had taken their toll on him. He explained, “I have to suffer in silence most of the insults that came my way—for example, the suggestion that my retrograde views of women reflect the experience of being waited on hand and foot by a compliant, submissive wife.” Contribution to a “Symposium on Transcending Ideological Differences,” *New Oxford Review* (October 1991), 20.

people to preconceptions that diminish the possibility of political change and coalition building. Lasch was right to argue that liberals must take into account the nasty influence policies can have in working class communities (i.e., busing) and the proclivity towards cultural conservatism among many working class people, but he was wrong to assert the working class must be seen as somehow redemptive.

When Lasch criticized therapeutic social control, he pointed to a danger in liberal reform. But as he drew out the arguments of Philip Rieff and started to suggest that therapeutic social control was practically an extension of secularization, he ignored that there were different tendencies within modernity. Certainly the tendencies he emphasized existed—therapeutic manipulation and a hubristic desire to find mastery over the natural and human world. But these were not the only products of modernity. The modern world certainly produced eugenicists and sinister ideas, but it also produced a William James—that is, a thinker who embraced both the possibilities and dangers of modern life. James (and pessimistic modernist thinkers like Sigmund Freud, Walter Lippmann, and Joseph Wood Krutch) did not suggest that we could ever achieve absolute mastery of the natural world or our selves; instead, modernity suggested to these thinkers a need to understand limitations, pluralism, and contingency. Though Lasch forgot it at times, there is, within the modernist tradition, a view that recognizes human limits. On this point, he forgot his own background—his original indebtedness to Cold War liberal thought, including that of one of America's most trenchant critics of progress, Reinhold Niebuhr. In other words, there is no need to go outside the liberal intellectual tradition to find critics of liberalism.

Lasch's more pointed critique of social reform as social control should push liberals to reassert a vision that grows out of the wider modern tendency I have just mentioned. There has always been a pragmatic dimension to the progressive tradition of reform; unfortunately, from an early point in his career, Lasch reduced pragmatism to opportunism or what he often called "adjustment." He ignored the potentials of pragmatism (something he later regretted in life). Reform, precisely because it challenges the more hubristic vision of revolution and a utopian making over of the world, holds to a vision of political change as slow and contingent upon reactions provoked by the world in which reformers interact. Reform always entails learning from experimentation as well as what Frederic Howe, in his autobiographical account cunningly entitled *The Confessions of a Reformer*, called "unlearning" previous prejudices. Reform can certainly lead to new forms of domination, but it does not *have to*. Lasch's depiction was one-sided and ignored the potentials of modern reform. At his best, Lasch himself recognized this problem within his own work, and at other times, he forgot it.⁵⁶

56. For Howe and more on this point, see my "Social Reform," *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, Volume II, ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter Williams (New York: Scribner's 2001) and "History as Hope: The Legacy of the Progressive Era and the Future of Political Reform in America," in

Lasch's emphasis on local civic life has become very much a part of Third Way political philosophy. There are few liberals today who ignore the potential of civil society. Lasch recognized that while liberals often turn to bureaucratic and national solutions to problems, there was always a localistic dimension to liberalism—the sort captured in John Dewey's political thought. Yet liberals have also been concerned with the problems of what Arnold Kaufman once called “municipal tyranny,” that is, how domination can operate at the local level or how, as Lasch himself pointed out, elites can use local control to evade justice. A major challenge for liberals today is how to balance out the protection of rights within local communities against the need to ensure local participation. Lasch wanted to secure participation while never giving up on the redistribution of resources from the wealthy to the working poor. Lasch was right to point to the liberal tendency to prioritize “distributive democracy” over “participatory democracy.” But it is not clear that to reverse this prioritization would be any better, a point that Lasch seemed to agree with. Liberals must balance both sets of values.

If Lasch prompts liberals to do anything, it is to look within their own tradition to find their own virtues. Lasch was wrong to believe that liberals shunned all civic virtues. After all, the proceduralist state—a term that he sometimes used—*holds to* a set of values (even if not articulated often enough). We are learning that lesson again from the work of William Galston, Stephen Macedo, James Kloppenberg, Peter Berkowitz, and others. There are liberal virtues and there is a liberal vision of citizenship. For instance, from a liberal perspective, citizens must be capable of listening and deliberating rationally. They must be capable, as Lasch himself showed, of becoming mature selves, autonomous enough to recognize one's own needs and self-interests from that of others. With this in mind, liberal citizens must be willing, over the course of their lifetimes, to embark on what one historian has called “self-improvement.” At the same time, liberals *do* embrace a sense of a common good, that is, some sense of equality and justice that must guide politics. They also believe, as William James did in his argument for a “moral equivalent of war” (an argument that fuels the recent calls for national public service programs), that we can find substitutes for the republican (and ancient) vision of a responsible and virtuous citizen. Substitutes might be weaker (less organic) than the things being substituted, but Lasch himself admitted that it was difficult to imagine how “small-scale production and political decentralization”—two of his most cherished values—could be “achieved in a modern economy.” For that reason, it would seem

Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century, ed. Ronald Hayduk and Kevin Mattson (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). See Lasch's comments on rethinking social control in “An Interview with Christopher Lasch.” For a more thorough defense of social reform, see Thomas Haskell, “Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility, Parts I and II,” in *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

foolish to chastise the liberal hope of finding modern equivalents for nurturing virtuous citizenship.⁵⁷

If we can toughen liberalism by listening to critics like Lasch, all the while recognizing the limits of their critique, I believe we can formulate a wiser and more chastened liberalism capable of dealing with new challenges. We should certainly learn from Lasch that capitalism damages liberalism's own virtues and hopes—the hopes of autonomous individuality, healthy families, and local civic associations. We should recognize the potential elitism lurking behind well-intentioned liberal plans. We should realize the need to balance participation with economic redistribution. But we need not take the dead-ends that Lasch's intellectual life took—that towards a romanticization of the working class or a bleak vision of “social control.” With that said, Lasch's own thoughts on liberalism can actually help us get to a better place, more ready for challenges ahead. Whether he would have wanted us to take his thought in this direction, I am not certain. But I am certain of one thing: Lasch claimed that his criticisms of liberalism were made out of respect. It would seem the right thing to do to pay back that respect by showing how liberals have listened and learned.

57. *The True and Only Heaven*, 532. See here Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also William Galston, *Liberal Purposes*.